# THOUGHTS

ON THE

# ABUSES OF THE PRESENT SYSTEM OF COMPETITION

IN

# ARCHITECTURE;

WITH AN

## OUTLINE OF A PLAN FOR THEIR REMEDY.

IN A LETTER TO EARL DE GREY,

PRESIDENT OF THE ROYAL INSTITUTE OF BRITISH ARCHITECTS.

LONDON:
PUBLISHED BY J. WEALE, ARCHITECTURAL LIBRARY,
59, HIGH HOLBORN.

M.DCCC.XLI.

LONDON:
PRINTED BY NUTTALL AND HODGSON, GOUGH SQUARE,
FLEET STREET.

# ON THE ABUSES

OF

# COMPETITION IN ARCHITECTURE.

---

My Lord,

So much has been said and written on the subject on which I take the liberty of addressing your Lordship, that I have little doubt, but that your attention, in common with that of many distinguished architects, has already been very frequently directed to it, in the discharge of the duties of that office you did so much honour to our profession in accepting, and whose trust you so zealously and ably discharge.

It may appear somewhat bold and presumptuous in me to trouble your Lordship with any observations on a matter that has been so frequently discussed; but I am urged, and I hope excused, by the conviction that you have deeply at heart all circumstances affecting the prosperity of the profession; and by the fact, that nothing of moment has yet been accomplished towards

redressing the evils of the present system of competition, so loudly complained of, I feel convinced that any feasible scheme having this object in view, will, whatever its objections may be, at least receive your Lordship's attentive perusal. And these alone are my excuses for respectfully submitting to you the following remarks.

That competition in Architecture, if judiciously and honourably conducted, would be of the first importance to the profession, and to the country at large, few will attempt to deny: tending, as it must in a great measure, to the destruction of the serious evils of monopoly and undue influence; and affording to deserving talent, which might otherwise struggle through life neglected and unknown, fair opportunities of attaining an honourable reward.

That the present system of conducting competition is fraught with evils of the worst description, is a truth universally acknowledged and deplored; but that the remedy to these evils rests almost entirely with the members of the profession themselves, architects, I think, are in general not sufficiently aware.

It is the chief object of the present Letter to shew that this is the case.

The writers on this subject—and their name is Legion—have rarely, I grieve to say, done more than utter loud complaints of the conduct

and decision of Committees, in the particular instances in which they may have been interested ; imputing to them motives of the worst nature in coming to such decisions, and indulging in the strongest invectives against the very men whose praises, before their disappointment, they were the first to sing.

Not that there has been any lack of plans for obviating the inconveniences of the system, as they have been felt in particular cases; for we have had regulations for the guidance of judges in their decisions, ideas for the prevention of corruption and intrigues, attempts in short to destroy every evil consequence complained of, while none seem to have dreamt that there was one great and only cause for all these grievances ; one hydra from which the whole race has sprung, and at whose numberless offshoots of evil every blow that has yet been dealt, has been levelled in vain.

I fearlessly assert that the root from which all the evils of the present system have sprung, is the total ignorance of those whom architects allow to sit in judgment on the arduous and difficult study of their lives.

I will not weary your Lordship's patience by dwelling on the innumerable instances of execrable taste by which the country has been disgraced, and for which it has to thank this cause alone :

my object is to prove what vast benefits the profession would derive from the removal of this fundamental grievance, by shewing what the various evils are, that have their origin in it; and I shall then, to the best of my humble power, endeavour to lay before your Lordship an outline of a plan, whereby Architects would be enabled, as I submit, to secure to themselves a remedy.

It will be generally admitted, I apprehend, that Building Committees must of necessity (in most cases at least) be composed of men of high standing and influence,—gentlemen known and respected in the locality where the work is proposed to be erected,—persons of upright and honourable minds, who, in advertising for designs, as a body, can have but one object in view; that of selecting the best from among those offered to their notice, and endeavouring to bring their labours to a termination satisfactory to all just and reasonable men.

How are these tribunals composed at present? Is it any exaggeration to say that they are made up of persons utterly ignorant of the science of Architecture; who not only possess no scrap of knowledge on the subject, but desire to possess none; who imagine that it is not at all essential to enable them to sit in judgment on the intricate works laid before them; who are men raised

to eminence, possibly by their own talent, perseverance, and industry in other professions, or in business; but who have never spent one hour in their whole lives in attempting to acquire information on the difficult subject of which they are the supreme judges; and whose opposite avocations would scarcely have permitted them to indulge in such a taste, even had they possessed the inclination to cultivate it. Is it not quite notorious, that these are for the most part the men who decide the most difficult questions of art in England? And, supposing all other influences at rest, is it not madness to imagine that bodies so constituted can be qualified to decide between competitors, each of whom brings, or should bring, for their delicate and careful examination, the results of many studious and thoughtful years: and the whole of whose future life, its success or failure, its encouragement or neglect, may hang upon their decree?

It may be urged, that men of this standing, possessed of common sense and common honesty, would not attempt to decide on the merits of works they do not comprehend. The evil is, that they believe they do comprehend them; and hold, that any man with five senses has a sufficient appreciation of the five orders of Architecture and all relating to them.

"So fools rush in, where angels fear to tread."

Try this by analogy. Suppose the same individuals required to give their opinion on a cunning point of law, or requested to hold a consultation on the case of a dying man; would the client or the patient who was compelled to abide by their decision be satisfied? Would not all men exclaim against the monstrous absurdity? And yet these gentlemen have quite as much knowledge of law and physic, as they have of Architecture.

These Committees, so constituted, advertise for designs. The first symptom of their incompetency for the task they have undertaken, displays itself in their instructions to Architects. They will stipulate that the building shall be in a certain style of architecture (of which they know nothing but the name); that it shall contain such and such accommodation, and shall be built of such materials, as would more than double the amount of the estimate it is on no account to exceed. On all essential points, the instructions thus furnished are usually of that vague and unsatisfactory nature, that, to architects residing at a distance, strangers to all the circumstances connected with the undertaking, they are in fact something worse than useless. With such information for their guidance the competitors have to prepare designs for an intricate and difficult erection in the space of three weeks or a month, nay,

in many cases in a fortnight! And as there is usually a reserve made, as to the successful candidate being employed in the erection, the competitor's usual business is to be neglected, and this alone attended to, for the chance of obtaining a pittance so paltry (though dignified with the alluring title of premium), that adequately to remunerate the mere draughtsman employed in any one of the more elaborate designs, would more than absorb the whole amount.

Again: ignorant of the time absolutely necessary for the preparation of a design, and the trouble, anxiety, and expense it involves; these Committees set their own absolute value on a certain quantity of drawing (the labour of which, even in its mere mechanical execution, they are unable to appreciate), offer this amount as premium, and believe they are acting fairly, and even liberally, to the profession.

It may be asked, with such evidence of the incompetency of Committees in the very outset of their proceedings, and with those monuments of their happy results which decorate our streets, and daily increase in number; is it not wonderful that so many should be found to engage in contests which constant experience teaches them are certain to be unsatisfactorily and unjustly conducted?

It is no matter of surprise. So long as hope

and ambition exist, competitors will continue to spring up, even under these degradations and disadvantages. Nor will other and less worthy impulses ever be wanting, so long as the present system lasts. Some are acquainted with certain members of the Committee, and imagine that through their influence they may secure to themselves the erection of the building : others, knowing full well the utter ignorance of the men who are to decide on the real merits of the works laid before them, make this their stronghold, and anchor of hope. They prepare designs on a scale of great magnificence, which, to carry out in their pristine grandeur, would cost twenty times the stipulated amount. They will be at considerable pains to render prominent the most striking portions of their designs, and to throw a veil over their various defects. They will employ skilful artists to prepare coloured, showy elevations and false perspective views of their principal features, to catch the Committee's unpractised eye ; and knowing too well that these designs could not possibly be executed for any thing like the stated estimates, modestly assert, in their accompanying remarks, that much of what they shew (though all in all to their designs, such as they are) might be omitted without the slightest injury to them. And the Committee believe it, because they know no better.

There are others again, deluded, honest mortals! who shut their eyes to the fact that the incompetency of the Committee entirely crushes the advantages to be looked for in their respectability and good intentions; who buoy themselves up with the conviction, that, whatever exertions influential parties may secretly make, still merit must at the last have its way; who will strive and struggle on, and who will send in designs honourably executed, alike fair to their brother competitors and to the Committee; which they conscientiously believe can be built for the amount stated. It is needless to say that this last unhappy class are doomed to experience nothing but vexation and disappointment; and that if they could catch a glimpse of the Committee in the very first hour of their sitting, they would most probably see them already sorting their modest designs from the showy and impossible draughts, and laying them aside with the flattering epithet of "rubbish."

It is notorious, that with forty or fifty designs before them for examination, Committees have frequently made their unanimous selection on a second or third meeting; nay, in some cases, on the very day the designs were sent in! When, so far from having entered into a comparison of the merits and particular arrangements of the several designs, (impossible with such men) they

cannot even have looked at all the drawings! Deception or influence carries off the prize, and degradation to the profession, and the architectural character of the country, inevitably ensues; and at last, after months of labour and vexation, devoted to stripping their pet design of its meretricious and alluring decoration, in order that its cost may be brought to within double or treble the amount of the estimate, the Committees find they have been nursing and rearing a meagre monstrosity, wretchedly constructed, and ill adapted; a lasting monument of ignorance, a laughing-stock to their neighbours, a disgrace to themselves, and an outrage in the public ways of a great city.

I will not dwell longer, my Lord, on these melancholy results; they are already too well known, and too deeply deplored. The question remains, what measures can be recommended for the correction of this abuse, and with whom should the adoption of those measures originate.

> Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie,
> Which we ascribe to heaven: the fated sky
> Gives us free scope; only, doth backward pull
> Our slow designs, when we ourselves are dull.

Any good, sound, practical change, must be brought about by our own unanimous exertions. Even were it in the power of Committees to erect a better system of competition on the present

basis; it is futile to imagine that any such measures will originate with them. So long as the controlling power rests exclusively in their hands, they will adopt their own narrow views on the subject, and those alone. We find, day after day, that if any valuable instruction happen to be framed by any particular Committee on one occasion, not a Committee in twenty that follow will adopt it.

I shall now take the liberty of proposing for your Lordship's consideration, an outline of a plan for placing competitions on a fairer foundation. Whatever the objections to the contemplated change may be, it is, at least, so simple in its nature, and so easy of adoption, that I think all parties interested in removing the abuses of the present system, would gladly see the experiment tried; and I will be bold to say, that few difficulties—save such as are of a nature that a few well considered rules would readily overcome—would be found in its path. But as you, my Lord, will at once be able to judge of the general feasibility of the scheme I propose, I will lay it before you without further preface, merely reserving to myself an opportunity of remarking briefly, in conclusion, on such points as may seem to require some further explanation.

My proposal is: That the Institute of British Architects shall make known to the public, and

to the profession, that they are willing to undertake, in conjunction with Building Committees, the management and decision of *all* cases of competition on the following conditions:

1. That on any competition being proposed, application shall be made to the Institute to take necessary instructions for the contemplated building.

2. That in every such case, a responsible person, fully qualified for the office, shall be deputed by the Institute to proceed to the spot, to consult and advise with the local authorities on all necessary particulars; to prepare a plan of the site; to obtain all information as to the nature of the ground and neighbourhood, the accommodation required, the funds at disposal, the description and cost of building materials, the foundations, levels, drainage, aspect, &c. &c. That he shall prepare, with the assistance of the Committee, a document, fully entering into detail on every such point, that it is essential competing Architects should be acquainted with. That this document shall be printed and distributed to Architects desiring to compete, on application at the rooms of the Institute.

3. That the Competition shall be open, as at present, to all members of the profession, and that no advantages whatever shall be obtainable by parties connected with the Institute.

4. That the Architect of the successful design, shall *in every case* be intrusted with the superintendance of the erection of the building, at the usual per centage; but that he shall receive no premium.

5. That the second best design, (and third and fourth, as the Institute may determine,) shall receive a certain amount of premium, fixed by them at a per centage rate on the estimate, or at their discretion, according to the difficulties to be surmounted in the design.

6. That the period allowed for the preparation of designs, the scale and style of drawings, shall likewise be determined by the Institute.

7. That in every case the designs shall be required to be lodged, on the day fixed, at the rooms of the Institute.

8. That the Architects shall accompany their designs with a specification, and any explanatory remarks they may desire to offer with reference to them; and that they shall likewise furnish an estimate so far detailed, or with the amounts under each separate trade, or such information with regard to quantities and prices, as will enable the judges to come to a decision as to its probable accuracy.

9. That the names of the Architects shall not in any case appear on the drawings.

10. That the whole expenses of the competi-

tion, with the exception of premiums, shall be borne by the competitors themselves; and that a fund shall be formed for that purpose, by the payment of a certain sum by each competitor on depositing his design. The amount to be thus paid, shall in every instance be previously stated in the instructions furnished for the guidance of competitors.

11. That on the receipt of the designs, the whole of them shall be immediately arranged for exhibition at the rooms of the Institute, or at some other place of exhibition selected for the purpose: and that the public shall be admitted to inspect them.

12. That such of the competing Architects as can attend for the purpose, shall, after a given period for the examination of the designs, severally deliver to the Institute their written opinion of the merits of the five (or more) best designs, excluding their own.

13. That the five designs that shall have received the greatest number of favourable opinions, shall then be laid before a Committee composed of a certain number of members of the Institute, not competing, and the same number of gentlemen of the Building Committee, to make their selection therefrom.

14. That in cases where it would be inconvenient for deputations from the Building Com-

mittees to meet members of the Institute, in order to come to a final decision; the members of the Institute shall, by themselves, in the first instance, examine the designs; shall make their own selection, and shall then forward them to the Building Committee, with their remarks and the decision for their guidance, but without recording the number of votes that have determined the result.

15. That the designs that shall have obtained the greatest number of united votes of the two divisions of the Committee, shall relatively be selected for execution, and for the award of the premiums offered.

16. That the Institute shall be at liberty to publish in their Transactions all successful designs they may think fit; and that the Architects concerned shall furnish all drawings and particulars necessary for so doing.

---

Viewing the importance of the subject to the profession at large, I cannot for an instant doubt, that even were the labours attendant on the plan I now submit, likely to be of an onerous nature, the members of the Institute would cheerfully undertake them; but when it is seen, that under this system, the duties imposed on them, if fairly

distributed, would be very immaterial—that in fact they would consume far less time than is now willingly bestowed on matters of infinitely less importance to the profession—I am most sanguine that with your Lordship's powerful recommendation and assistance, they would heartily co-operate with these suggestions.

It has sometimes been asserted, that while the Institute are, of necessity, fully aware of all the abuses of the present system of competition, and its injurious effects on the profession; they will still never make much real exertion towards any efficient reform; that the very circumstance of the Institute being composed, chiefly of men of established reputation, renders them inimical to the principle of all reform in this respect; in short, that they have nothing to hope from the improvement of the present injurious system, and much to risk from its destruction.

These objections it is unnecessary to note. They can only be entertained by a very small number of persons; for it cannot be supposed that sentiments so narrow-minded, would for an instant bias the better judgment of an influential body of a liberal profession.

Indeed the steps the Institute have already taken, and the inquiries they have instituted, are, in reference to this subject, a sufficient refutation of the calumny; and clearly shew that they not

only acknowledge the magnitude and importance of the evil, but have at the same time its correction sincerely at heart.

With respect to Building Committees, many individuals, I know, will doubt that they can be brought to view the proposed alteration with any degree of complacency; but I am not the less persuaded of having their cordial acquiescence.

I do not know of a single case of any importance, where there has been a competition, in which the judges have not been mercilessly assailed for their decision, or for some part of their proceedings; where motives of a dishonest and corrupt nature have not been imputed to them, and falsifications, deceptions, and intrigues most roundly asserted. Now these Committees being, in the majority of cases, composed of men of influenee, of the first respectability and undoubted honour; the bare imputation, however undeserved, of such conduct, cannot fail to be galling in the extreme.

For this reason, and as my proposal is only to assist and guide them in their decisions; (as the Judge of the Admiralty Court, being a Doctor of Civil Law, is assisted in nautical questions by two Masters from the Trinity House, who sit on the bench with him,) and as I do not propose to remove entirely the power from their hands; I must believe that they will gladly fall in with any

measure, that has a tendency to free them from the responsibilities of a task, which they cannot, from their previous education and habits, satisfactorily discharge without such assistance; and consequently to free them from the unjust and undeserved attacks, which the unassisted discharge of that duty involves.

Apart from this, which might appear a selfish argument on their behalf, I cannot but believe that, their object being to reward the greatest merit, they would, however confident they may feel in their own judgments, deem it a great relief to be confirmed when right, and corrected when wrong, by the opinions of the first men in the profession; particularly when it could be obtained free of trouble or expense.

The numerous advantages, my Lord, that must be derived from such a change will, I think, occur to most men.

Every competing Architect would have clear and sufficient instructions for his guidance in preparing his design; whereas in most cases, at present, these are only partially obtained, at great cost and care, by a few of the influential competitors.

As by the means proposed of coming to a decision on the merits of the designs, it will be impossible that any would be selected of an impracticable nature, or whose author would be

incompetent to carry it into execution; it is only just to stipulate, that the successful Architect shall, in all cases, have the superintendance of his work.

The tyro by this means can no longer be placed on a level with the eminent man; and the circumstance of the successful being in every instance assured of their just reward, must tend to bring into the field the higher classes of the profession. Committees, and even private individuals, being at the same time certain of a satisfactory result in all cases of competition, much of the practice of the country, that is now, to the great detriment of the profession, monopolized, will assuredly fall to the lot of its deserving members equally.

The injurious effects arising from the short period allowed for the preparation of designs, the confusion to the judges of a variety of scale, the deceptions practised in this and other respects, and the enormous expenses incurred by Architects, in preparing striking and impossible views—all these evils, unfair and unjust on all parties, would be immediately removed.

With respect to the expense to individual competitors of the system I propose; I submit, they need and will not amount to one-fourth of the charges to which they are put at present. The vast sums now expended in travelling for

information, in the employment of artists, in the preparation of elaborate models and finished pictures, are the subject of common remark; and I believe, were evidence procured by the Institute, of the actual cost to the body of competitors in any recent important case, the united amount would startle even them. The principal portion of this cost would be saved; coloured views would of course be prohibited, (many will bear in mind the admirable remarks of Mr. Cockerell on this subject in his last Lecture,) models would be unnecessary, and all useful information would be afforded without trouble or loss of time. It will be evident that the necessary expenses incidental to the proposed change, even with the addition of a remunerating fee to the Members of the Institute who may be appointed judges on each occasion, (should it be considered advisable) can be but very small and inconsiderable, in comparison with the amount thus uselessly and vexatiously expended.

It may be objected, that in addition to the unavoidable charges competitors must, at the best, incur, and the expenditure of time and anxiety, for which the majority can have no recompence, they ought not to be called upon to defray the cost of providing necessary information; an item that should, in common justice, fall on Building Committees. No one would, for

an instant, deny the truth of such an objection in the abstract; but we cannot gain all we wish; and this part of the proposition is made solely with the view of reconciling Committees to the change. Architects would certainly be the gainers from it in most important points of view; and it would surely be wise in them, in presenting such an alteration for the adoption of Committees, to prove to them, that the advantages to be derived from it, would not be exclusively on the side of the profession; to shew, in fact, that they are willing to make some sacrifice for the purpose of effecting a wholesome removal of the present intolerable abuse.

The advantages derivable from a public exhibition of all competition designs are universally acknowledged; whether this should take place previously to the decision, is a point, however, on which many are at issue. By the system now proposed, there would certainly be the less necessity for any antecedent expression of public opinion; while on the other hand, I do not see that any evil would be likely to result, and it would at least give the public an additional interest if they were admitted prior to the decision, and while the question was yet in abeyance.

The proposition that the competing Architects

shall, in the first instance, make a selection of a certain number of the designs, is made with the sole view of abridging as much as possible the labours of the Committee. Having, of necessity, in the preparation of their designs, fully studied every particular with respect to the proposed work, they will of course be able to judge, almost at a glance, whether others have conformed to the instructions laid down for their guidance, whether they have far exceeded the estimate, or have adopted such incompatible arrangements as to place themselves entirely *hors de combat.* While it would be certainly unadvisable that the ultimate decision should be in their hands, this step would at least remove much of the difficulty and trouble from the joint Committee, with whom the final decision would rest, in examining a number of plans that might, from some circumstance or other, prove decidedly objectionable.

I presume it would not be necessary, nor even advisable, that there should be more than three professional judges on the Committee; but this point, and the question whether their services should be remunerated, would be best decided by the Institute. In any case the sum necessary for amply meeting this expense, would, as I hope I have shewn, be scarcely felt by the body of competitors, and would meet the objection (which

might be raised), that the Institute were neglecting their own duties for the benefit of persons probably unconnected with it.

The method of voting, and some other matters of detail, between the members of the Institute and the Building Committee, would necessarily require certain special arrangements, which I do not consider it essential to enter upon here, as not affecting the principles of the measure; but which I have considered, and for which I have provided.

The advantages to be derived on all hands, from the publication of the succcessful designs, I think will be universally admitted; presenting to the country a record, in which they would take especial interest, of what the profession itself considered most valuable; and to the student and practitioner an important collection of the best examples on various subjects, the absence of which is, at the present moment, much felt and deplored. This, I have little doubt, under proper guidance, instead of an expense, might be made a source of addition to the funds of the Institute.

It may be asked whether all the advantages derivable from this change, would not equally be gained by Architects resolving only to furnish designs in those cases where professional men are constituted the judges. Without stopping to

inquire into the difficulties of persuading Committees to make that concession (which, after recent occurrences, no one will deny), let us at once turn to the frequent results of this plan, when, with an unusual degree of modesty as to their own capabilities, Committees have been induced to call in professional assistance. How often have we seen in such cases, that after awarding premiums, and lauding to the skies certain designs, the Committee has suddenly discovered that not one chosen plan is at all fit to be selected for execution! How often have they been found so utterly impracticable as to render it absolutely essential that another design should be procured! So far from meeting the difficulties of the case, this appears to me the crowning sin of all; and how, let me ask, is it to be guarded against? Is it not melancholy—heart-rending to the competitors, to reflect that the months of professional labour they have given to the subject, the talents they have exerted, and the large expenses they have incurred—that all this, and more, has been done for the sole end of enriching the man who has been appointed to sit in judgment over them? Further still, has not ere now a successful competitor ascertained that his own impracticable and rejected design is about, in a mutilated and vulgarized shape, to be erected by his judge?

Before taking leave of this subject, I feel, my Lord, that some apology is due for the crude and faulty manner in which it has been brought to your notice. I had hoped it would have been undertaken by some hand better qualified for the task; but having hoped in vain, I considered it a duty to remain no longer silent. It is a subject on which, convinced of its vast importance to the profession, I could have wished greatly to enlarge; but rather than risk wearying your patience, my Lord, or uselessly taking up your time on a matter that may be handled, many times hereafter, much more ably; I have endeavoured to compress into the smallest possible space the remarks I had to offer.

Whatever the objections to this plan may be, or whatever attacks it may be destined to encounter, I lay down my pen as I took it up, in the strong confidence that neither you, my Lord, nor the Institute over which you so worthily preside, will allow your opinions to be biassed by unsupported assertions; but that, sensible of the importance of the subject, you will give it your careful and serious consideration, undeterred by frivolous or interested opposition.

My Lord, if what I have written should work this great effect, and should do no more than lead others to devise and adopt means, tending, but more surely, to the same high end, I shall

feel proud that I have not addressed you quite in vain, and shall reflect with satisfaction, "how poor an instrument may do a noble deed."

I have the honour, my Lord, to subscribe myself,

Your Lordship's very humble Servant,

HENRY AUSTIN.

*To the Right Hon. Earl de Grey.*

Printed by Nuttall and Hodgson, Gough Square, Fleet Street.

Special 91-B
35783

THE GETTY CENTER
LIBRARY

1/88
L47
#1013